

DISCOURSE TOPIC ORGANISATION: SIGNALLING MACRO-TOPIC BOUNDARIES¹

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In discourse analysis, the notion of topic has proved to be an extremely useful tool as a central organising principle for discourse. The aim of this paper is to investigate structural markers used by English speakers in effecting a change of topic, and more specifically, an opening or closing of a macro topic. In our taxonomy of discourse topic organisation applying to English conversation, Markers are signals used to mark a boundary in the discourse topic, without an explicit reference to or inclusion of the topic. They include words and phrases largely devoid of referential content like *well, now, I see, yes*, etc. which may occur in different combinations or clusterings or with other segmentation devices such as pauses, endorsements and repetitions.

1. Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to investigate Signals (and particularly, Markers) used by speakers in effecting a change of topic, and more specifically, an opening or closing of a macro topic. The overall purpose is to arrive at generalisations about some of the fundamental functions of these elements in discourse organisation. In our taxonomy of discourse topic organisation, Signals are units used to mark a boundary in the discourse topic. In this respect, they are part of the expression plane (as opposed to the content plane) within our taxonomy, together with Topic-Formulating Devices. But, unlike the latter, they signal a change in the topic without an explicit reference to or inclusion of the topic. Signals include Markers, Addressers (ie. vocatives) and Formulaic expressions (like *God bless you!* or *thank you very much*). This study concentrates on Markers, which are words and phrases largely devoid of referential content such as *well, ehm, now, I see, you see, you know, yeah*, etc.² They have also been called discourse markers, fillers, hedges or continuatives in other works (Brown and Yule 1983, 106; Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 1990). They are units which have been or are in the process of being grammaticalised and are used as macrostructural

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² However, there are levels in the expression of semantic content by markers. Rather than a dichotomy we are dealing here with a gradation in which a marker like [m] would be placed at the bottom of the scale, *I see* close to the other end of the scale and *well* in between.

organisers (on a textual level) and/or as phatic elements, establishing the interaction between speaker and addressee (cf. Fuentes Rodríguez 1996). In general, they have been found to be significant devices of segmentation in narratives and conversation (Goutsos 1997; Schiffrin 1987).

Our data base was extracted from three surveys from the *London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English* (cf. Svartvik and Quirk 1980). The three texts are described below in terms of the characteristics of their speakers:

- S.1.1: 2 speakers (2 male academics, age c. 44 (A) and 60 (B))
- S.1.3: 3 speakers (3 female undergraduates, ages c. 36 (A), 30 (b) and 36 (c))
- S.1.5: 4 speakers (3 female secretaries, ages c. 21 (A), 35 (C) and 21 (D); 1 female academic, age c. 25 (B)).

2. Functions of Markers in Topic Introduction

Markers fulfil diverse functions, depending on their position within the tone unit and turn, and on the kind of move they belong to. The two major functions are those of topic introduction and topic closure.

The analysis of the data indicates that the Markers mostly used in introducing a topic in conversation are [:@:m] (and variants), used primarily, and *well*, which appears less frequently. Other Markers such as *now* also occur but to a much lesser extent. Markers used in topic introduction tend to coincide with a change of turn and appear in initial position of tone unit or clause (in a grammatical segmentation of the text):

- (1) A: well ^that finishes th\at# . [:@:m] . ((now)) ^what was the \other thing {I ^wanted to :=ask _you#}# . ^[i] ^is . ^is it 'this y\ear# that [:@:] ^N\ightingale _goes# - - (S1.1, 236-39)³
- (2) A: *^y=eah#* ^=I {^s=ee#}# - ^w\ell# . [:@:m . dhi dhi] the "^(other thing} \is you s/ee# that . ^if . you !h\aven't _got _time# to ^mark ((a)) paper by about . [dhi] . "^(any p\aper# by a^bout the !middle of Jul\y# - - then it's ^not worth . !w\orrying a_bout it# . un^til . the :end of [dhi] summer . va!\ation# (S.1.1, 162-70)

³ Prosodic symbols used in the examples include the following: # = end of tone unit, ^ = onset of tone unit; NUCLEAR STRESS: y\es = fall, y/es = rise, y\es = fall-rise, y/es = rise-fall, y=es = level; PAUSES: . = very brief, - = brief, - - = longer, - - - = long; *yes*/+yes+ = overlapping speech. [:@] is used as a symbol for the phoneme *schwa*.

Table 1 shows the number of instances of each Marker found in each of the texts and their frequencies:

	[@:m],[@m], [@:],[@]		well		[m],[hm], [mhm]		now		you know		I mean	
S.1.1.	15	44.12	5	31.25	1	20	2	50				
S.1.3.	17	50	6	37.5	3	60			2		2	
S.1.5	2	5.88	5	31.25	1	20	2	50				
Total	34	100%	162	100%	5	100%	4	100%	2	100%	2	100%

As can be seen in Table 1, different variants of [@:m] have been found in the data, namely [@m] and [@], together with various forms of [m], basically [mhm] and [hm]. In this respect, it seems that [@:m] and [@m] very clearly mark an opening (or transition) move at a macro level, or transition of an aspect or perspective of a macro topic but still not a local topic. By contrast, [m] has less relevance for topic transition at a global level. Its function is more local, although it also reoccurs in contexts of topic introduction (apart from other contexts in which it is used as a temporiser, or delaying tactic).

We have to distinguish between an abrupt topic switch, on the one hand, and a slight shift of the topic, on the other. The second situation may involve several possibilities.⁴ We may have a progression in the discussion from particular to general:

- (3) C : does ^h\e come 'in on 'Saturdays# -
 B : he ^c\ould I th/ink# I *^don't*
 ? : *^[\m]##*
 (B : :kn\ow# I'm ^never :there to !s\ee# -
 A : **well** ^m\ost of them { ^s=eem#}# to come ^floating 'in on

:S/aturdays#

(S1.5, 284-90)

or from one aspect or perspective of the general topic to another one as in S.1.3, in which the speaker is talking about different aspects of an interview in a women's college:

- (4) A : ^w\ell# . ^let's take the interview ffirst# (S1.3, 244-45)
 (5) c : *[m]* ^who . who was doing the \interviewing# (S1.3, 434)
 (6) (A : [dhi: @m] - - - ^lunch was all r/ight# [lan] ^lunch was fairly
 :civilized# (S1.3, 512-14)

⁴ Sinclair's notion of *prospection* seems relevant here. He uses it to cover general cases where "the phrasing of a sentence leads the addressee to expect something specific in the next sentence" (cf. Goutsos 1997, 55).

Otherwise, the discussion may follow a temporal progression:

- (7) A : and . [@m] ^th/en# . a ^b\ell _rang# - - ^and - !millions of fleet# .
^r\an# . a^long c\orridors# (S1.3, 560-64)
- (8) A : - and ^then [@m - - d] you ^kn/ow# the ^meal pro:c\eeded# .
(S1.3, 765-66)

Alternatively, the slight shift of the topic may be an indication of a different opinion on the part of a speaker from the general point being discussed:

- (9) B : ^I !find 'this 'group's 'pretty !d\edi'cated# and they sort of ^work all
day
A : *^y\es#*
(B : and 'work all !\evening# ((well)) ^I can't st\and 'that#
? : ^[m]# - - -
B : and ^Hart you've 'got to 'stand \up to# ((^h\aven't you#)).

(S1.5, 112-18)

Topic introduction is not always signalled by means of Markers. Whereas text S.1.1 exhibits a profusion of Markers associated with topic introduction, in texts S.1.3 and S.1.5 the topic is frequently introduced by an elicitation (interrogative) exclusively. This may be regarded as too abrupt in other conversational texts including different speakers and situation, as in other texts in the London-Lund Corpus. This suggests that there is a wide range of factors which may condition the use of these Markers in discourse topic organisation: formality of the conversation, power relations and professional rank of speakers, the delicate or private nature of the issue being discussed, and, ultimately, individual linguistic habits of the speakers, as part of their idiolect.

3. Functions of Markers in Topic Closure

In signalling topic closure, the most used Marker is *yes* (or variant *yeah*), followed by [m] or [hm]. Other Markers such as *I see*, [@:m], *quite* and *well* are also used to a lesser extent. These results are summarised in Table 2:

	yes, yeah		[m], [hm]		I see		well		quite		you see		[@:m], [@:]	
S.1.1	28	73.68	6	54.55	3	75	2	66.67	3	100	2	100	2	100
S.1.3	3	7.89												
S.1.5	7	18.42	5	45.45	1	25	1	33.33						
Total	38	100%	112	100%	4	100%	3	100%	3	100%	2	100%	2	100%

Table 2: Markers functioning in topic closure: Frequency

The investigation of the data reveals that topic closure is very often effected by means of a profusion of different Markers, and repetitions of some of them:

- (10) (C : **^[** . ^I have a 'nasty 'habit of :being about
 B : **^[m]#**
 (C : :half an hour !'early# . and he ^sort of seemed ((!very surpr'ised
 a`bout it))#
 B : (laughs - -) -
 A : " ^y\es {that's ^r\ight#}# - ^y\es {that's ^s\o#}# ^coming for !\unch#
 - - - ^y\eah# - - ^n\o# ^y\es# (S1.5, 157-65)
- (11) B : ((and)) ^your as:sistant *ex:aminers will !w\ork ((them#))* . but if
 you
 A : * ^yes !qu\ite# ^y\es# ^y\es#*
 (B : ^give them a ^give((n)) them a :free hand on !s\ynthesis# and
 they(('d) be ^marking all !s\orts of _stuff# . be^cause they 'can't do the
 stuff *them! !s\elves#.* I must ^watch the t\ime _Reynard#
 A : * ((^qu=ite#)) ^[=m]#*
 (B : * ((or I ^may miss the b\ank#))*
 A : * ^y\es# ^y\es#* ^y\es# you ^m\ust# - (S.1.1, 1194-1208)

These clusterings or combinations of Markers occur at the boundaries that set off one topic from another in both opening and closing move sequences, but especially in topic closing moves. See in this respect Table 3, which presents the different possible clusterings found:

SINGLE MARKER		CLUSTERS	all of them appearing once unless otherwise stated
yes, yeah	6	yes yes yes (yes)	4
you see	2	[m] [m] ([m])	2
I see	1	yes ... yes (...yeah...yes)	2
well	1	yeah I see	
[m]	1	I see yes	
		yes... exactly	
		yes... of course	
		quite [m]	
		[@ :m] well	
		yes oh yes	
		yes quite yes yes	
		yes I see yes yes	
		yeah ...well... [@:]	
		[hm] quite so	
		[m] [m] [m] yes quite yes yes	
TOTAL		11	20

Table 3: Markers functioning in topic closure: Distribution

Our data also reveal that, in closing moves, Markers may also be reinforced by the use of other devices, not assignable to the class of Markers, such as endorsement and evaluating remarks, vocatives (addressers), summaries and repetitions:

- (12) B: if ^I catch the !one twenty-:Veight {from Vic^tVoria#}# ^that *gets me in at about . !half past twVo#* ((and)) I ^get to
 A: *((and you'll ^then you'll ^get your .))*
 (B: the *b\ank* {you ^s\ee#}#
 A: *^y\es#* . ^get to ((the)) b\ank# ^y=es# (S.1.1, 439-45)
- (13) B : ^now [@] I shall see you :ten o'clock on . Wednesday m\orning#
 A : ^on Wednesday m\orning# . ^thank you for dropping /in _Sam# (S.1.1, 1209-11)
- (14) A : [:@:m] you're ^very kind old S/am# - - ^b\less _you# well ^that finishes th\at# . (S.1.1, 234-36)

As opposed to topic introduction, topic closure is very often not signalled at all by Markers of the type discussed here: the topic can either drift or be terminated and not be rounded off at all.

4. Conclusions and Further Perspectives

In this study, we have attempted to explore some of the most relevant functions of Markers such as *well*, [:@:m], *I see*, *now* and *yes* in the sequentiality of discourse topics in English conversation.

In general, topic introduction is more marked, in terms of a higher frequency of markers, than topic closure. This may have to do with the fact that, as Goutsos (1997) suggests, topic introduction is an "obligatory" strategy, whereas topic closure is optional.

Clearly, this study is not exhaustive in that there exist other Markers and strategies which could be found to be relevant for discourse topic organisation and should, accordingly, be included in a comprehensive study of the issue. Among these we can distinguish the use of pauses, for instance, which were found to recur especially in topic closure:

- (15) A: ^[h\m]# - - ((^quite s\o#)) - - - (S.1.1, 754-55)

Linguists who have studied discourse markers have claimed that these can be *multifunctional*. For example, the Markers *well* and [:@:m] are often used in the data, at the beginning of a response, with the function of qualifying what comes next (cf. Svartvik 1980):

- (16) B : well ^that's the whole :tr\ouble (({you ^s=ee#}#)) that's ^obviously what is worrying !h\im# - - -
 A: [:@:m] - - - it ^seems to m\e# that - [:@:m] - - - (S.1.1:A627)

or in contexts of self-corrections (often both markers combined):

- (17) A : the ^[ouw] the ^only . the ^only !other . possib/ility# . [:@:~] ^w^ell#
 . **not the ^only other possib/ility#** . but it ^seems to me that you've got:
 two . _two th=ings# [:@:~] . that you can . ^d\o with th/is# (S.1.1, 679-83)
- (18) A : ^w=ell# . ((I ^m/ean# I'd be [pr] sup^port it compl\etely#)) ^on !two
 com:pletely :separate gr\ounds# . ^/one# . that it " ^d\oesn't con_tribute to
 [dhi] . candidates . [@] ^thr^ee _separate _grounds# [:@:~] - ((it))"
 ^d\oesn't con_tribute to [dhi] { ^candidate's a:b\ility#)# . ^{to . wr/ite# .
 or . ^r/ead} . corr/ectly# (S.1.1, 1102-08)

Although this is no doubt true, we would claim that functions of Markers such as qualifying or restating what comes next, or self-correcting, are not dissociated from topic management. Rather, they do carry out a function related to topic, for instance, effecting a shift by means of qualifying or restating, etc. The relationship between these functions and topic has not been established in studies such as Startvik (1980). This is one of the areas in which we wish to continue investigating.

From all this previously stated it follows that structural Markers represent optional "cues" which speakers may use in organising what they want to communicate, indicating to the listener (and analyst) the way discourse proceeds. "Failure to mark out explicitly the structural organisation of what a speaker wishes to communicate may make the addressee's task of interpretation more difficult, perhaps, but, by itself, would not necessarily constitute a failure to communicate" (Brown and Yule 1983, 106).

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